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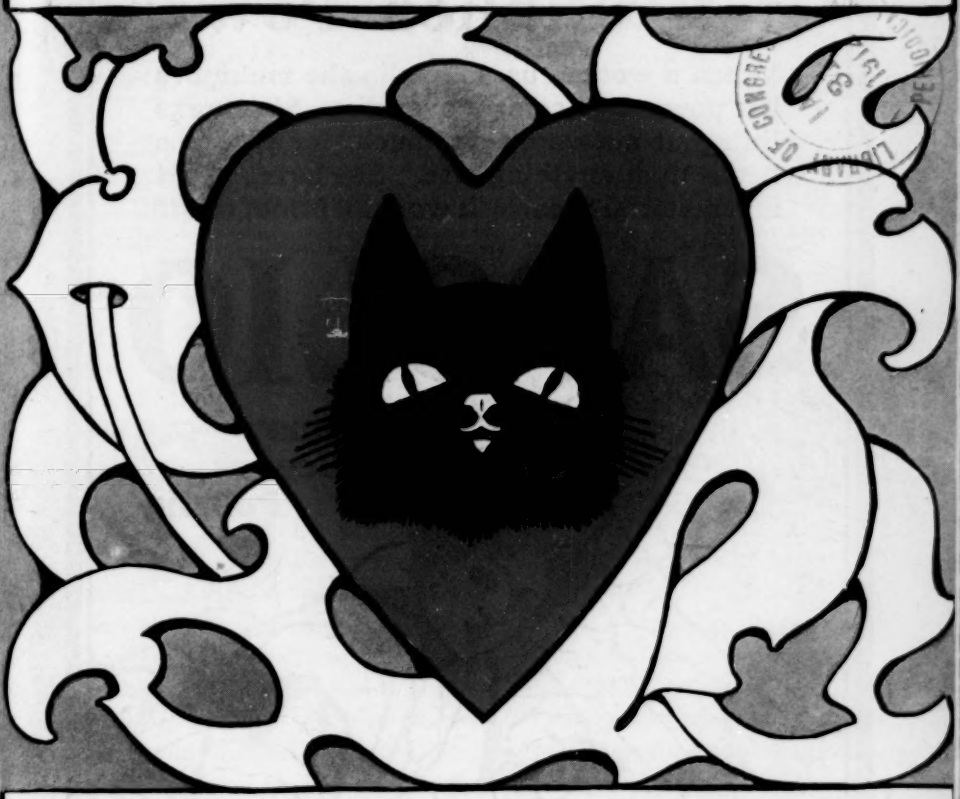
The Black Cat



FEBRUARY 1912

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Ten Cents

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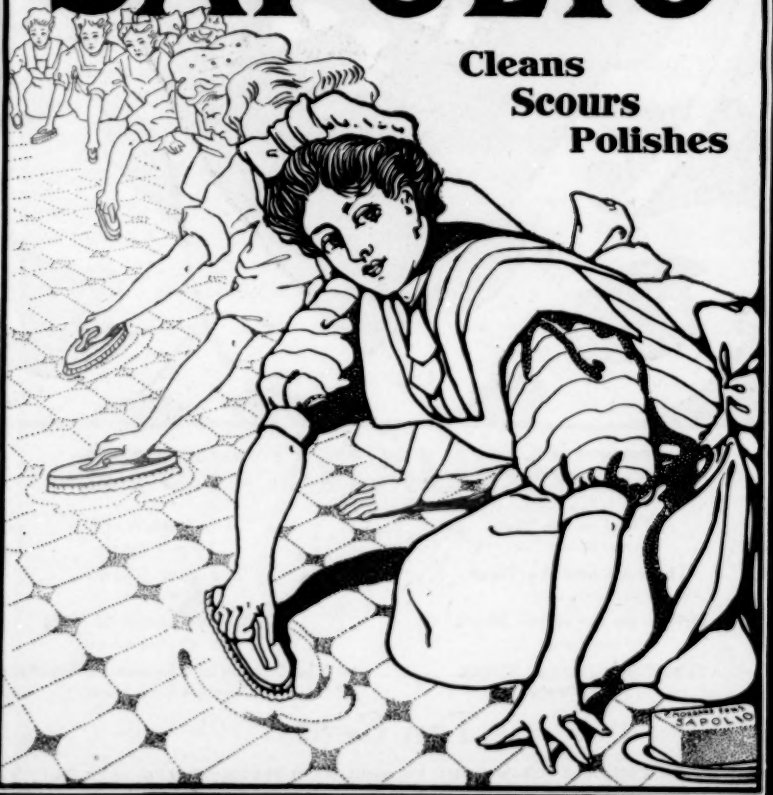

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A Thief in the Night.*

BY HOWARD MARKLE HOKE.

BARBARA PERTH sat alone in the library. A June shower drummed on the granolithic walk, which approached the old, ivy-grown stone building as if conscious that it was an upstart. For a time she tried to detach the music of the rain from the plash of the fountain under the oaks; then strongly inclined to be meditative on such an evening she took a volume of essays from a remote and sepulchral alcove, kept sacred to the memory of the obsolete, and returned to her librarian's chair.

A step sounded on the vestibule tiles. She saw a stranger there, holding his soft hat under his arm, as if he had preferred to let the drops fall upon his iron-gray, curly hair, from which they trickled to his broad shoulders. With practiced eyes Barbara studied him during the half minute he stood flipping the water from his hat, and, with a bound of interest, decided that no one like him had ever crossed the tiles.

"Pardon me," he said, with decorous humor, as he walked to the exchange counter. "May a descendant of Noah come in out of the deluge?"

"The library is open to everybody," she responded, rising. "I would not dare keep Noah himself out."

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"I was afraid I might have to be one of a favored few," he said, his eyes twinkling with appreciation of her reply. "I've been in libraries, great and humble, all over the world, and some of them have rules like the chains on ancient Bibles. I haunt libraries wherever I go, and I suspect I've been a loafer and a nuisance in many a one."

His delicately chiseled face glowed with such an affection for his book-loving memories, and under his sprightliness lurked such a suggestion of deep seriousness, that Barbara awoke with a start to the embarrassing discovery that she had been staring at him ever since he had given her a courtly bow.

"I'm sure you never could have been either," she caught herself saying, and blushed helplessly. She was now thrillingly certain that, during all her years of service there, no such man had come to the counter.

"Have patience and you'll see," he laughed. "How can I get the right to take out books?"

"Present an application signed by two responsible citizens."

"Bless me, I don't know a soul here, responsible or irresponsible. Perhaps I may come and read."

"Oh, yes," she replied; then, frightened by the enthusiasm of her assurance, she added: "Everybody is welcome who is respectable and knows how to handle books."

"I have only my word for the first," he chuckled, "but I can prove the second. With my eyes closed I'll tell you whether the book in your hand was made in England or America."

She gave him the volume, and he continued:

"See, my eyes are closed. I press the book, opened in the middle, against my forehead. So! Perhaps I ought to utter talismanic words in a satanic voice, but I'm no strolling magician. In plain, every-day Anglo-Saxon, then, I pronounce this an English book."

With a facetious imitation of a prestidigitating flourish he returned the volume to her as she said, with frank wonderment, that it was an old copy of Addison.

"What a necromancer I'd make," he joked. "But it's simple — as all good tricks are. English glue has a stronger odor than ours, that's all. Get an American book and note the difference."

"Why it is very different," she said, after testing the two volumes. "What an odd point to know!"

"That odor is a fragrance to us booklovers," he said, more seriously. "And it never leaves a book. The Attar of Roses, as you know, is a lasting perfume, and I like to think of this fragrance of books as the attar of old romance. Ridiculously sentimental for this prosaic age, isn't it?"

"Not at all," she differed enthusiastically. "Nine out of ten marked passages in books here are the sentimental digressions."

"Oh, we're all sentimentalists if we'd 'fess up," he declared. Then the sparkle vanished from his face, and he added: "If only all mysteries could be as easily explained. I'd like to solve the mystery of this night — to know that it will not leave me any of its shadows. I — pardon my bad habit of thinking aloud. May I know your name?"

She pointed to a card bearing the library rules, and he said, with a flicker of his humor:

"Mine is Alfred Yeargood. That might signify that some one year of my life has been good or some one is going to be. The one to be must improve mightily, then, over the has beens. But I see it is time for you to close. So I'll bid — listen how it rains. Have you an umbrella?"

"No. I came before the shower."

"You couldn't walk a block without being drenched. Wait."

He was gone before she could stop him. She went back to her desk with the book, but saw no word on its yellow pages. This stranger's fancies were like measures from a beloved melody not heard for years. She had learned to smile at the egotistical days when she had been sure of a romance in her life. Now, the gleam on a handsome face, the music of a voice, a knightly manner, a hint of mystery, and she was again in a time of rosy expectation — without the smile.

Steps sounded. There he was again, puffing a little, but laughing youthfully and holding a dripping umbrella.

"But what will you do?" she asked when he handed it to her.

"Oh, I'd enjoy a good June soaking," he answered, "and I'll get it before I turn in. I'm very restless at night. Constitutional, perhaps. Sometimes I prowl until daylight, and — I note your

embarrassment. I'll not insist upon being your — umbrella carrier. Good-night."

In the vestibule he turned to bow, and she noted that all of his gayety had died from his face, leaving there an expression of deep anxiety.

She walked slowly to the house where she made her home with a Mrs. Dace. From the porch she glanced back along the street. At the corner, beyond the row of maples, was a figure in the electric shine. From the flower-beds rose the perfume of spring; in her heart was the attar of old romance.

The evenings brought to the library the usual patrons — old readers with tastes as fixed in their orbits as the summer stars in theirs; feathery people who brushed among the lint and dust of fiction; solemn people steeped in tragedy and tears; women from the sumptuous suburban residences, craving the latest sensational stories of the opulent; and lads and lasses who came not for books but to see one another and play life's melody to the time of a minuet. But the one who was different from all of them did not come.

The ways and thoughts of the villagers had never been Barbara's and she now felt more than before like an alien. She wondered how their babble had ever interested her. Her sense of isolation had wrought perfect frankness regarding her own emotions; so she owned to herself that she hoped the stranger would come again and was disappointed when he did not.

But one evening, a week later, she suddenly saw him among the group at the counter. She was not surprised that her heart beat rapidly. Smiling his recognition, he obtained a magazine from her and went with it to one of the reading tables. A few minutes before nine, when all other patrons had gone, he brought it back.

"I've neglected your library shamefully, haven't I?" he asked.

"How could a booklover stay away so long?" she asked in return.

"I haven't been one since I was here," he replied, with a disturbed hesitation. "I haven't read anything. How hard life does jostle us at times! I have had to prowl while other good folk were asleep. But" — with a chuckle he broke away from the thought — "I know the countryside by heart. The glaring newness of

the summer homes on the edges makes the village all the more venerably beautiful. Did you ever think that a moonlight night is the best time to — but, there, I'm riding my hobby. It's your time to close."

"Yes," she said, with a glance at the clock.

"Would you —"

He stopped, holding her eyes irresistibly. Then he ventured:

"The air is delightful and we still have a piece of the moon. Walk with me for fifteen minutes. Pardon me, do you know you have a gift — a rare one — and I need it to-night. You can drive away the blue devils, and they're swarming to-night. I haven't found any one else in the village who can do it."

This corroboration of her unboastful self-estimate thrilled her, held her tongue fast — but she went with him.

Their stroll was the first of many that turned all other Junes and Julys into commonplace fragments of time. Often it was eleven o'clock before he bade her good-night at Mrs. Dace's door. It seemed to her that he was the medium by which the great world, which she had so longed to see and in which she had hoped to play a part, was being made an intimate part of her existence. He spoke of cities and countries with the familiarity of her village acquaintances in referring to the towns and townships of the county.

Barbara did not hold the friendship at arm's length and scan and question it and try to make herself believe it was only ordinary. She encouraged it to grow into the very fibres of her soul, and so it grew. She knew it was the romance she had expected in her girlhood.

More and more she felt like an alien. The village news had no personal appeal. Even the sensation that was exciting it from end to end did not quicken her pulse. In the minutest detail the library patrons discussed every evening the burglaries that were being committed with startling frequency among the homes of the wealthy residents, but, like the Indian plague or the Messina earthquake, these crimes were terrible, but distant and not of consequence to her. What was there in the statements that the criminal was recklessly bold and the most skilful that had ever baffled the police to one who was living in a world of exquisite tenderness, starry nights and love?

One evening as she was preparing to go to the library, Mrs. Dace knocked and came in at her invitation. Having no children of her own, the widow had assumed a maternal attitude toward all the world, and this sometimes impelled her to take vigorous measures in the way of advice and restraint. As Barbara looked at her then she knew she had come for such a duty.

"Barbara," she began in her affectionate manner, "I have missed you dreadfully in the evenings this summer. You remember that you used to come and we had pleasant talks on the porch or strolled together. So I thought I would ask you this evening if you ever knew this Mr. Yeargood before?"

"No," Barbara cried, detecting disapproval in her pronunciation of the name, "but — oh, he is the most — "

She cut off the words that would have confirmed the truth betrayed to the keen listener by the impulsive "Oh!" and questioned instead:

"Why do you ask?"

"My dear," Mrs. Dace said, "don't you know how the village is stirred up about the burglaries? You must have heard about them. And hasn't it ever occurred to you that this man is a total stranger? Nobody knows anything at all about him and — and — "

The warning voice broke off, and the village gossip rushed like a poisonous air into the librarian's fairy realm. She had not foreseen that a thing so beautiful as her love can scarcely outlive a roseleaf. The awful suspicion benumbed her. As if the words came from a great distance she heard Mrs. Dace say:

"Has it gone so far as this, Barbara?"

"You have seen, Mrs. Dace," she answered, rising stiffly.

She went to the library as if groping through a fog. It followed her into the shelved room, and it made those who came for books dim and spectral. One man, whose home had been broken into a few weeks before, gave the details of the latest burglary:

"The scoundrel shot at Graham night before last. This burglar is a daredevil and won't stop at anything. But he'll soon be up against it good and hard. Several of the best detectives from New York came down the other day, and they have a plan that will soon put the villain where he belongs. He will do just about one more robbery and then they'll have him."

Barbara was conscious that each word was a stab, but she was unable to suffer. An icy numbness held muscle and nerve and brain.

At 8.45, his time for coming, she was alone. She felt that she must not see him, yet she could do nothing to avoid the meeting. Presently his step sounded on the tiles, alert, eager as it always was when he came. She rose dazedly from her chair. She was not afraid — only numb. He came to the counter out of the fog.

Then, instantly — by the magic of her love — muscle, nerve and brain were released. Never before had she seen such a smile upon his face. It told of some new expectation, some new ground for perfect happiness. She rose into supreme exaltation. Something had driven away the anxiety that always lurked under his smile.

"Barbara," he said, in a voice that uttered and echoed his gladness. "I am a boy to-night. I have had such news. No —not to-night. I may be deceived — as I've been before. But God forbid. I shall be away to-morrow, but I shall come in the evening as usual, and then — *then* I will tell you all. It is almost time for me to go to the train, but come with me a little way."

She delayed as she took her hat from a hook. Why was he going away? Had he heard of the plans for capture and was he merely making a vulgar escape? For an instant the numbness held her again, but she drove it away. She would be happy. She would never let him know that she had harbored the suspicion for a second. Yet all their evenings together had given her a right to know the truth, and, returning to the counter, she said:

"I am excited to-night, Alfred. Everybody is talking of the dreadful burglaries. They say the man is a terrible, murderous criminal, and everybody is alarmed. But he can't keep on with his crimes very long. A man was here this evening and he said that the police have plans that will soon lead to his capture."

The book in his hand fell to the floor. He stooped for it but not before she saw that anxiety had rushed back to his face. But when he rose he was smiling again, almost as sunnily as before.

"Why should we waste our few precious moments discussing such a thing, Barbara?" he asked. "What is it to us if some man has a misguided notion of the rights of property? Why should

we distress ourselves if a millionaire loses a few trinkets. Instead of that we should be happier than we have ever been."

In a twinkling she was scorning herself. It was almost sacrilege to suspect this man of low thievery. What if his prowling at night and his reticence regarding himself had troubled her? She would not let them do so again. She wished to be happier than before and she would be. He saw some reason why they should be. She would trust everything to him.

It seemed to Barbara as if all previous evenings had prepared for the sweetness and peace of this short one. His cheeriness, his strength, his unquestioned integrity were keeping everything that threatened at bay. Her faith in him was as deep as the sky and as bright as the stars.

They came to a rustic seat in a small park near her home and sat upon it for a few minutes.

"Barbara," he said, led to the declaration by their previous words, "this summer has had a meaning to me that no other one ever had. Has it not had to you?"

The words struck her into silence. They brought a sharp realization of the situation. Suppose the suspicion were true. Could she tell him — a thief — the sacred meaning of her summer? She loved the refined booklover, the traveler, this man of the world — but this other, the night marauder? Suppose they were the same?

Suddenly he sprang up and stood before her, his hands clenched, terror upon his face.

"Forget what I have said, Barbara," he cried. "I should not have spoken — yet. It was my new hope that led me to it. But it may fail me again — as it has done before. If it does, then the happiness I have dreamed of for us — is impossible."

She rose to speak, but a chill dread held her silent.

"To-morrow night I will know if the burden I have carried so long is gone," he went on. "If not, I shall never return and — "

She swayed. He caught her, held her fast in his arms and kissed her. Then, as if struck by a lash, he started from her and cried:

"What have I done? Forgive me, Barbara — if it is forgiveable."

In a monent he was hurrying through the dim moonlight. She stood tensely gripping her hands and staring. Had she been kissed

by a thief? Had he, among his crimes, not scrupled to rob her of her peace?

The night dragged. During the periods of belief in him his kiss rested upon her lips like a blessing; in the blackness of doubt it had the sting of degradation. She hurried from the house in the morning before Mrs. Dace appeared. In the tumult of emotion a substantial support like her regular duties was necessary. Besides, the long day must be passed until evening should bring him again or his failure to come would tell her that her romance had come and ended.

Soon after the doors were opened a woman hurried in. She was much excited, and said:

"Have you heard the news, Barbara? The whole village is upset, but, thank goodness, we can sleep peacefully now. James Caruthers, the grain commission man, caught the burglar in his house last night about two o'clock. The robber shot at him but missed and Mr. Caruthers shot and — killed the scoundrel."

"Killed him?" Barbara repeated, her own voice sounding far away.

The earth seemed to lurch, then stand horribly still. The numbness gripped her again, but more icily. She turned away to record the number of the book chosen, and when she looked around several other patrons had come and all were discussing the sensation, repeating again and again its most exciting details. From them she learned where "the dead burglar" had been taken. Then, when the patrons left, she asked herself again and again whether he had had a presentiment, when he said he was going away, that he was to take this black journey.

When she closed the library for the noon hour she walked slowly to the place where she might stand in the presence of the dread certainty. Her right to go was clear in her own mind. What would the criticism of the villagers amount to? It could not make the tragedy more terrible. In any case, she must bear the blow alone, for, under the circumstances, no one would truly sympathize.

Within a few minutes she walked from the undertaker's place. The earth was reeling as if it would never again be still. The face she had seen was his. Upon its changeless expression was the whimsical, adorable smile. Who could have

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believed that it had masked the instincts of a criminal?

The evening hours limped toward the closing time. It seemed to Barbara that some one, far distant, was suffering agony — some one with whom she ought to sympathize but could not. Something held her fast, as if time and circumstance were in a blinding swirl, and she was a moveless clod that could not feel or suffer.

With the doors still open, a few minutes before nine, she left the counter to prepare for going out. She intended to walk along one of the ways they had blissfully taken together. She could not go home and endure any motherly kindness from Mrs. Dace. She needed silence, a vast solitude, to think it all out alone.

A step sounded from the tiles. She stood motionless. Another step — startling in its familiarity. Staggering from the corner, she looked. For an instant the chill of the supernatural clutched her, but in a moment she knew. It was Alfred, in the flesh, but haggard, broken as she had never seen him. The sight caught the swift rise of her emotions from the depths into a great joy and held her fast over an abyss of blank perplexity. Then she crept forward to the counter as he tottered to it.

"Barbara," he said, hoarsely. "I told you I would not come back if I found I must go on carrying my burden. My hope of last night is dead. I must never let it deceive me again. But I could not stay away from you. I needed you — your gift of comfort. And you have the right to know what my burden is."

He stopped, his lips quivering, and she said:

"Let us go out, Alfred, under the stars, and you can tell me there."

"No," he said, "I want to tell you here where I first met you. I must not ask you to accept me as a companion until you know all. Listen! The man who has been robbing the houses here all summer — I have followed him all over the world, pleading, pleading with him to stop his crimes."

He paused as if recalling the painful incidents of the strange association. Barbara waited, her eyes upon the distressed face.

"He laughed at me until yesterday afternoon," he went on at last. "Then he promised that he would meet me in New York this morning and we would arrange for him to go to some obscure place far away and take up some worthy occupation. That promise

thrilled me with happiness last night. I believed that I was at last to be free. But, Barbara, he did not come — he did not come."

"Alfred," she said, "I — "

"Please," he stopped her, "until you have heard everything. What I have suffered is not only a burden — it is the fearful possibility of a great sorrow, a disgrace, that I ought not to ask you to share. The burglar is my brother, Barbara — my twin brother."

A sob shook him, and he bent over the counter, broken in spirit, extending his hand in farewell. She caught it convulsively between both of hers, and said:

"Then you do not know, Alfred?"

"Know?" he repeated, looking up at her dazedly.

"That all you have told me cannot make any difference between us," she said. "Your burden is gone, but you must be strong to hear how it has been taken away. Come, we will take our pleasantest path and I will tell you."

The Raja and the Tiger.*

BY C. ASHTON SMITH.

HERE was more than one reason why Bently did not view his appointment as British Resident at Shaitanabad with enthusiasm. The climate was reported to be particularly hot even for India, the population largely composed of snakes, tigers, and wild boars, and the attitude of the natives from the Raja down unfriendly. The last Resident had died of sunstroke, so it was said, and the one before him departed suddenly for an unknown destination without taking the trouble to apply for leave of absence. But as somebody had to occupy the position, Bently went to Shaitanabad; from the nearest railway station one hundred miles by camel and bullock cart over parched hills and sandy desert.

His early impressions of the place were hardly reassuring. His first glimpse of it was from the summit of a cactus-covered hill through a red haze of dust-laden heat. The principal feature which caught his eye was the Raja's fortress-palace perched on a high rock on the northeast side and grimly overlooking the flat-roofed city. It was known as the Nahargarh, or Tiger Fort. For the rest Shaitanabad may be summed up as a place of narrow, irregular alleys, bazaars with shops little larger than dry-goods boxes, bad smells, a perpetual plague of insects, gaily clothed people, and a general Arabian Nights atmosphere. A thousand years ago it was the same, and so it will be a thousand years hence. The local temperature was 120° in the shade, sometimes more. Except the Resident, there were no other Englishmen in the place, not even a missionary. That is sufficient testimony as to Shaitanabad's character.

Bently regarded it as fortunate that the Residency was situated outside the city, and that his predecessor's staff of Bengali and

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Rajput servants were waiting to receive him. A bath, a fairly well-cooked meal, and a good night's rest, in spite of the heat, removed the exhaustion of the journey, and made the outlook appear more satisfactory.

His first duty being to call on the Raja, he early proceeded to the palace accompanied by his servant, Lal Das. Ascending a flight of steps cut in the towering sandstone rock, which was the only means of access to the fort, Bently passed through a great gate into a courtyard. There he was left to stand in the full rays of the broiling Indian sun while the Raja's attendants went in to announce the Resident's arrival. Finally they returned and conducted him through a deep veranda into a hall, from which another room opened. This room, carpeted with Persian rugs and hung with rare kinkhab draperies, seemed cool and pleasant after the heat without.

The Raja, Chumbu Singh, was seated on a cushioned *gadi,* surrounded by several attendants. He was a tall, slender man of about forty, and wore the peculiar Rajput side whiskers. His attire consisted of a pearl embroidered coat, trousers of white tussah silk, and an elaborately embroidered turban. One hand toyed with the gem-encrusted hilt of a short sword stuck in a broad silk *cummerbund.*

At this first meeting conversation was short and formal. The Raja asked after Bently's health, and requested his opinion of such matters as the climate. He spoke fluent English, and seemed well educated and intelligent.

"I hope you will like Shaitanabad," he said, finally. "Sport here is good. If at any time you care to hunt tigers, I shall be glad to place all the facilities in my power at your disposal."

Bently retired on the whole rather favorably impressed with the Raja, and inclined to treat certain adverse reports of his conduct as exaggerated. Native princes are always more or less prone to irritation at the ways of British Residents. Probably such was the basis of Chumbu Singh's offense in British official quarters.

During the next two or three weeks Bently thought he had reason to be pleased at his judgment of native character. Chumbu Singh fell so readily into certain administrative reforms proposed

by Bently that there appeared little doubt of his earnestness to walk in the path of modern progress. So far things looked much better than he had been led to anticipate, even the temperature dropping to 98° at midnight. It was after the settlement of a land ownership case, in which Bently's assistance had been requested, that the Raja made a proposal.

"I have arranged for a tiger hunt to-night," he said. "Would you like to go?"

Bently eagerly responded in the affirmative.

"This is a terrible animal, sahib," continued the Raja. "He has killed many people. His den is in the hills — an old cave temple, haunted, my people say, by ghosts and devils. However that may be, the tiger is many devils in himself. He stalks both cattle and villagers in broad daylight, and kills not only when hungry, but out of the devilishness of his heart. We have planned to get him at the cave."

When the last rays of the sun had faded from the hot red sandstone of the Nahargarh, and the gray veil of dusk had fallen over Shaitanabad, Chumbu Singh and several followers came to the Residency to announce that all was ready. They were armed and mounted on wiry Baluchi ponies. Bently joined them, accompanied by Lal Das, and the party set off across the rapidly darkening plain. Their destination, as indicated by Chumbu Singh, was a mass of low-lying jungle-clad hills two miles to the northwest. The plain, or rather desert, between was barren with scarce a tree or shrub, and its monotony was broken only by a series of nasty mullahs, or gulleys, which gave much trouble, necessitating careful horsemanship and slow traveling.

Reaching the hills without mishaps, the horses were left near an old tomb in charge of the servants. The Raja, Bently, Lal Das, and two Rajputs continued afoot. They first followed a bullock trail and then a narrow foot-path, one of the Rajputs acting as guide. The path, winding up and down, through cactus jungle, deep ravines, and among great boulders, led well into the hills.

The moon had risen, and as they emerged from a patch of jungle, Bently saw the cave temple of which Chumbu Singh had spoken. It was in a steep hillside, where the formation changed from sand-

stone to light granite. In front was a level space overgrown with cactus, jungle plants, and a few larger trees. There were three entrances, the central one being about fifteen feet high, and the other two smaller. The larger one was open, but the others were choked with debris.

The hunters toiled up the hillside, scrambling over boulders and through the thick scrub. There was no path, and it was not pleasant traveling. A handful of cactus spines, even on a moonlit night in the presence of ancient and interesting ruins, is more productive of profanity than enthusiasm.

"This is the ancient temple of the Jains," said the Raja when they at last came panting to the entrance.

Bently peered within to behold the moonlight shining on huge indistinct figures, old forgotten gods carved in the solid granite. There were also great footprints in the thick dust, evidently those of the tiger. Undoubtedly he was a monster animal, for Bently had never seen pads to equal them.

The two Rajputs examined the pads carefully, and gave it as their opinion that the tiger had crept forth on stalking bent about nightfall, and would probably not return until morning. They were sure he was not in the cave. The Raja seemed annoyed at the prospect of a long wait, and abused the Rajputs for not arranging matters so that they might have arrived at the cave earlier and so intercepted the tiger.

"I owe you many apologies," he said, turning to Bently. "You see what comes of trusting to these fellows. But since it is such an effort to get here, I suggest that we wait for the tiger."

"Certainly," agreed Bently. "I am willing to wait as long as you like for a shot at that beast."

"Very well," the Raja nodded. "In the meantime suppose we take a look at the cave temple. It is an interesting place, of its kind without equal in India."

To this Bently readily assented. Thereupon the Raja sent off one of the Rajputs and Lal Das with an order for the rest of the retainers to keep watch in case the tiger returned unexpectedly. The other Rajput then produced a torch, and the party of three entered the cave. First they passed through a sort of peristyle,

or antechamber, which, thirty yards from the entrance, opened into a vast grotto. This was the main excavation. Huge stone pillars, elaborately sculptured, supported the roof, and around the sides great gods and goddesses of the Jain mythology, called Arhats, glared downward. The torch illumined dimly, leaving much in shadow, and in the shadow imagination created strange fantasies. A narrow passage from the grotto ended in a smaller chamber littered with fallen fragments. It was more than once necessary to climb over some god whose face was in the dust. Another short passage led to an arched entrance two-thirds blocked with debris.

"We cannot go any further," said the Raja, "but if you take the torch and climb up on that pile, you will be able to see into a greater cave beyond. My superstitious retainers believe that it is the abode of ghosts and devils, the guardians of the temple."

Bently's curiosity was stimulated. Torch in hand he surmounted the obstruction, and peered into a gulf of black darkness. He seemed on the verge of a great precipice, the limits and bottom of which the torchlight failed to reach. From far beneath he fancied he caught the splash of water tumbling over a rocky bed, and strange echoes floated upward, but he could see nothing. It was an appalling abyss, which, for all he knew, might sink into the foundations of the earth.

Suddenly he received a violent push from behind, accompanied by a muttered curse hurled from the Raja's lips. Bently tumbled forward, and in doing so threw out an arm wildly to save himself. It caught the barrel of the Raja's rifle, swept it from his grasp, and hurled it clattering into the chasm beneath. Bently promptly followed the Raja's rifle down a steep crumbling slope to what would have been certain death, had his own rifle not brought him up with a jerk by becoming lodged to half its length between two rocks. As it were, there he hung in mid air with the buttress of his rifle for his only support. A shower of following pebbles swept on down into nothingness.

For some moments he remained almost stunned by the peril of the situation, but presently his mind began to gather in the slender chances of escape. He had apparently been brought up with his back against a side-wall of rock and with one foot rest-

ing on a narrow projection. Reaching out a hand, and groping with it, he discovered that the narrow projection was one of a flight of irregular steps cut in the rock and leading upward. If a hazardous foothold, he presumed it had been used at some period, and decided to tempt its course.

He balanced himself carefully, and disengaging his rifle, crept slowly upward step by step. Once his foot slipped, and he almost fell, but throwing himself inward he found he had stumbled into the entrance of a narrow passage. That meant safety from the chasm at any rate, and he gave vent to a huge breath of relief. His next act was to test the springs of his rifle, and so far as he was able to judge in the darkness he was further gratified to find that it was uninjured. Then he went cautiously forward, guiding his progress by a hand on the side-wall. Presently he came to a broad flight of steps partly choked up with fallen debris. Climbing up this, he emerged into the grotto of the temple.

Then he drew back suddenly. A coughing snarl echoed through the cavern. Bently softly moved behind the stone image of a god, and looked out from its shadow. From a cleft in the roof of the temple a stream of moonlight fell within, and toned with silver the yellow body and velvet stripes of a monster tiger. It also shone upon the prostrate forms of the Raja and his Rajput retainer, held beneath the huge paws of the Lord of the Jungle. Again the coughing snarl echoed through the temple. The eyes of the beast flashed with savage thirst for blood as it lowered its head to plunge its fangs into the throat of one of its victims.

Bently raised his rifle to the shoulder, took steady aim, and fired. A terrific roar shook the stone gods, a gigantic convulsion seized upon the body of the tiger as it rolled over. Bently fired again, and then strode from his place of concealment. Another shot at closer range finished the death struggle of the tiger. Its last breath went forth in a choking growl of defiance.

It took but a cursory examination to convince Bently that both the Raja and the Rajput were past rendering any account of their treachery on this earth, and a lack of response to his shouts made it plain that the Raja's retainers had promptly bolted when the tiger unexpectedly returned. The Raja and the Rajput had thus been left to encounter the powerful beast unarmed.

How Bently regained the Residency was a matter he was unable to explain except by instinct, but daylight had already broken when he reached the compound. Then he acted with swift decision.

He sent orders for the Raja's retainers to appear at the Residency for an investigation, which eventually led to a thorough exploration of the temple. By another entrance the bottom of the abyss was gained, and sundry relics discovered there proved how the Raja had relieved himself of the undesirable presence of those who interfered with his dubious proceedings.

Driven on the North Shore.*

BY FRANK SWETT.

OW is it I'm not a lake captain now, and why am I running a Duluth Hotel, and speculating in Duluth real estate? Well, gentlemen, I can tell you if you have a mind to listen.

"It was like this," the landlord went on, speaking to a knot of travelling men gathered about the open fire. "I had followed the lake for twenty-five years or more, in every berth from a common sailor's up to the captain's. I had been shipwrecked three or four times, and upon two occasions nearly drowned; still I was happy, and kept my nerve.

"True, I had said once or twice that the time would come when lake navigation would be the worse for the loss of my services, but really I had never seriously thought of retiring.

"We were heavily loaded and bound east from Duluth, making the last run of the season. It was late, too late for safety, along the latter part of November; but the season was mild, and bade fair to remain so long enough for us to make the trip.

"We had a good run out, and were somewhere off the Apostle Islands when one of those peculiar lake storms came down on us all in a breath. It didn't appear to come from any particular point of the compass, but seemed taken with the one idea of making it as lively as possible for the crew.

"We'd had an eye out for heavy weather, and were already close-reefed, so there wasn't much of anything to do but shut the hatches and hang on.

"I made an earnest effort to keep her head on; but the wind shifted so often that it was of little use.

"After knocking about in this way for six or eight hours, drifting no one could tell where, the constant strain upon the craft

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began to make itself felt. Our cargo shifted and began plunging around between decks and in the hold.

"Things were looking pretty smoky at best; but to add to the general gloom, about this time, while we were trying to stay-lash one of the boats and a part of the rigging, two of the crew were lost overboard. As I saw the poor fellows clutch wildly at nothing, and then disappear in the black waters, I shuddered with horror, and calling all the others in, made no further attempt to do anything but keep aboard; hoping 'twas in the steamer to ride out the storm.

"I don't know how many hours it was. I hadn't the heart to keep track; but after a while we began to settle heavily to one side, and every gust of the storm on the other side would almost turn the keel out.

"The wind now became steadier, and this made us a little more hopeful; but it blew — well, I've never been in a hurricane, unless perhaps that was one; but the force of the wind was so great that it was as hard as a rock, almost, to press against.

"And now, to offset what little hope there might be in the increasing steadiness of the wind, the mate reported a leak forward. Soon it was impossible to keep ahead of the water with the pumps, and I saw that the fires would presently be out, and the ship at the mercy of the storm.

"Then I concluded 'twas no use; to stick to the craft only meant making her our coffin. So I told the boys that we must try to lower the boats.

"Something was wrong with the davit tackles, and in attempting to lower the first boat we swamped her. But the second and third we managed to get into the water keel down.

"While we were at work we were unable to communicate easily with each other, and when we assembled to get into the boats, another lad was missing. The men, for the first time, showed signs of losing their nerve; and I found I was made of the same kind of clay, for I weakened a little myself.

"It seemed almost impossible to get into the boats, for the ship pitched to leeward so that a man was likely to strike the water fifteen or twenty feet from the place where he intended to strike it; and we couldn't load and lower away in the usual

manner, for the boats would surely swamp in the attempt.

"The mate went first, and he was followed by the others in turn, until all were safe aboard but John the cook and myself. When I gave him the word, the poor fellow lost his head and slipped. The last I saw of him was his pale face gleaming in the black water, as he came to the surface only to be struck by a displaced spar.

"I needn't tell you how that accident affected me; any man who says he has a nerve that nothing will affect, either doesn't know what he's talking about, or else doesn't regard the truth. But I braced myself for the effort, and succeeded in getting into the boat alive.

"I had meant to take charge of the first boat, and put the second under the command of the first mate; but in the tumult the mate and I got into the first boat. The third officer was a splendid sailor, and rather than risk a transfer in the heavy sea, I let the boats stand off, manned as they were.

"For a time the two boats kept about the same course, but gradually they drifted apart, and in an hour we lost sight of our companions.

"Up to this time, you see, gentlemen, our experience had been that of those who suffer ordinary shipwreck; but from this point we started on a new tack.

"I sat in the stern, and using an oar in place of a disabled tiller, kept the boat headed to leeward. The other boys spelled each other by gangs of two in bailing; for the boat had been badly sprung.

"We shipped a good deal of water in addition to the leakage, for the sea danced along the gunwales during the whole run, and occasionally spilled over.

"I tell you, gentlemen, the swell of that sea made a lasting impression upon my mind. The big wave of every third set would almost drive me from the rudder, and it was all I could do to keep from throwing myself headlong into the bottom of the boat. I sat there, my head turned to the right, and looking over my shoulder, counted the waves; and when the ninth came up behind me it seemed to be a mighty mountain of water towering right over my head, ready to break and crush me.

"I had hard work to resist the temptation to spring away from that overhanging, trembling mass of blackness; and it was only my long experience as a sailor, and the certain knowledge that for me to desert the rudder meant death to all, that kept me stanch.

"For days afterward I could get no sound sleep; and when, finally, completely worn out and exhausted, I would lose myself for a moment, that wall of water would appear above my head and over my shoulder, trembling, swaying backward and forward, sinking and rising, and cause me to start wildly out of my sleep.

"I stayed there, though, and with the big oar for a rudder kept the boat headed steady to leeward, and so we drifted with the storm.

"When we cut loose from the ship we judged it was about noon, and after we had been adrift an hour or more snow began to fall, mixed with a driving, biting sleet.

"As we scudded along, I cast about in my mind, vainly attempting to ascertain our course. When the gale struck us we had not made the eastermost of the Apostles; and this led me to suppose that the storm was driving us in a northerly or westerly direction; because, if the wind had come from the west or north, it would before this have driven us upon the islands.

"We hoped that we were going toward the northeast, for in that case there would be more water ahead of us. That was the only time in my experience when Lake Superior didn't seem large enough; and during that sail I wished from the bottom of my soul that she was as big as the Pacific Ocean.

"I sincerely hoped we were not drifting toward the northwest, for I knew Beaver Bay was the only point between Duluth and Port Royal where there was the least chance of our making a safe landing, and to strike any other part of the North Shore meant certain death.

"Bound for the North Shore of Superior, and swishing along through the inky water as fast as the driving gale could carry us! We had no idea where we were, whether near to or far from the shore, or at what point we'd strike it. None of us spoke, but we all thought the same thoughts.

"Hour after hour passed; the snow whitened everything upon the boat, and caused the water to look blacker by contrast. Through the driving sleet I could see the forms of my companions rising and falling with slow precision, as they bailed; they were white as tombstones, and just as silent. The only sounds that broke the stillness were the shrill piping of the storm and the swish of the water as the bailers emptied their buckets.

"And now it began to grow dark. I dreaded the night; matters were bad enough by daylight. Every man of us knew there wasn't a chance in a thousand we'd strike the North Shore but to be dashed in pieces against its walls of stone — to be gathered up by the foaming waters, and cast in death where no friend could ever come.

"The hours went on. I fancied, long before I did hear them, that I heard the waves pounding against the rocks, and roaring within the caverns of the shore. I pictured a thousand times the shock, as our boat should crash against the cold, wet stones. I felt, in anticipation, the water's cold embrace. You know a man's body seldom rises in the waters of Superior.

"Still the waters bore us on; still the snow fell, and the storm swept round about with unabated fury. Still, with most of us, the men rose above fatigue. For one poor fellow, however, nature refused to continue the struggle, and he sank exhausted in the bottom of the boat.

"The others continued their monotonous labor; two would bail while one gathered strength, then he who had taken respite would join in again, and one of the other two sink in weariness.

"I sat in my place; the numbness of cold was in my flesh and bones, and I was fast falling asleep.

"A movement on the part of one of the men roused me. He ceased his labor, and standing up, listened. Then I heard what he had heard.

"Gentlemen, I can feel that sensation now; and whenever I see the lake angry under the lash of a driving storm, the same feeling of utter despair again comes over me.

"They all heard it now—the distant thunder of the waves on the rocks; and I saw all three men turn and look at me. It

was dark, and of course I couldn't really see the expression of their faces; and yet I did see them, gentlemen — every face sprang at me out of the darkness, and every line of horror in those faces was as plain to me as if the sun had shone upon them.

"My mind saw it all, and memory caught and has kept the horrid picture. There was the certainty of coming death on every one of those drawn faces.

"Then, to cheat the heart and mock the soul, came strange and vivid pictures — pictures of green fields and pleasant stretches of woodland, with groups of cattle straggling homeward, and troops of happy children playing.

"Nearer and nearer, more and more distinct, came the booming of the surf. The angry crash was all about us, and so filled our ears that we could not hear one another call.

"We expected the crash — we shrank from it; we cowered in the bottom of the boat. Then all at once that deafening noise, that tumult of sound, was behind us.

"That was all; where before it had been in front of us and all about us, it was now seemingly behind us. We could see nothing in the darkness and the snow.

"I was bewildered. I thought I had lost my reason; and then I heard the voice of the mate:

"'Captain, we've run into a bay! We're saved! we're saved!'

"Then I realized what had happened; and man that I was, I cried like a child.

"In a few minutes we grounded on the beach, and getting out, removed the silent form of our companion. He was dead.

"We put him back again, and protected him as best we could from the ravages of wild beasts. Then as I turned away and set my face toward the wilderness, I shook my hand against the treacherous lake, and told her she should never have me again; and she never has had me!

"Out of fourteen, four were left, and our prospects were not much brighter now than when we were at the mercy of the waters. But with new hope we began our weary march.

"All night we tramped, and all the next day, with but a morsel of food to sustain us. It grew steadily colder, and about

noon Schilling, a Swedish sailor, told us in piteous broken English that he could go no farther. We used our last match in lighting a fire, gave him half our store of food, and went forward.

"In three or four hours the other sailor gave out, and we — the mate and I — had to leave him. What a time of horror that was! The expression of despair and anguish that was on that man's face, as we turned away and went on, has haunted me ever since.

"His feeble and helpless calls came to our ears while we were still in hearing, growing fainter and fainter as we went on.

"As night approached we saw, away ahead on the lake shore, a thin line of smoke; and before dark we came to an Indian tepee. There were two Indian women and three or four children in the camp, and from them we learned that we had run into Beaver Bay.

"They gave us food and hot drinks. The men came in shortly. We told them about our companions, and employed them to go back along the trail with food and stimulating drinks.

"The sailor we left last struggled onward all the afternoon, and when the Indians came to him he was still alive. He lived, but both hands and one foot had to be amputated.

"Poor Schilling had let his fire go out, and when they found him he was dead.

"No more of it for me, gentlemen; the lakes have had me in their power for the last time. When I have a call East, I always go and come by rail.

"Bedtime? Well, I guess so. Tony, rake the fire down and put on some more coal. I feel chilly. That's it; now show the gentlemen to their rooms."

The Singingfest at Shiraz.*

BY MICHAEL WHITE.

"WHAT has become of Ridgeley?"

The question was put by one of two men, who had risen from a luncheon table and strolled out into the spacious hall of a private mansion. "I guess he's detained by the real estate agent who sent in about some property he contemplates purchasing. By the way, have you ever seen Ridgeley's collection?"

"No," replied Burns.

"No! Well, you certainly ought to. Let's look at it now."

Anson led the way to a long gallery opening off a balcony on the first landing. When across the threshold both men paused to view the superb spectacle. From floor to ceiling the walls displayed a unique and priceless gathering of objects picked up in the still remote corners of the earth. From the depths of the Dark Continent skins of rare beasts, from the Never Never Land of Australia relics of a prehistoric race, from the Top of the World in the fastnesses of the Himalayas banners and trophies secreted there by conquering tribes. In glass cabinets reposed amulets, rings, and necklaces of gold set with precious stones recovered from Etruscan tombs; vases and drinking-cups of crystal, amethyst, and topaz from the imperial palaces of the Orient. Burns gazed around upon the collection in admiring wonder.

"Isn't it a bit strange," he remarked at last, "that with all these treasures Ridgeley never set over them the one they would most fittingly adorn — a wife?"

"Ah!" ejaculated the other. "I guess that question can be answered by asking another. Now, what would you consider Ridgeley values chiefly in this place?"

"It would be hard to make a choice."

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Anson moved to a small table which was a masterpiece of buhl and ormolu work. On its surface of intricate inlay stood a glass globe, and in the globe was a little stuffed bird on a perch.

"There is the gem of Ridgeley's collection."

Burns glanced from his companion's face to the modest object and back again, with a puzzled expression.

"What! That? Nonsense!"

"Still, it is an absolute fact so far as Ridgeley's opinion goes."

"But why in the name of all that's commonplace?"

"It's a nightingale!"

"What of it?"

"Why it died of a broken heart."

"A broken heart?"

A laugh and a shake of the head proclaimed Burns's disbelief in the explanation.

"You doubt such a thing is possible?"

"Oh, well, if you mean heart failure I may yield the point. But an actual heartbreak —"

"I mean an actual broken heart," retorted Anson. "There are cases on record — Porter and the leaping tuna fish, for example. You knew Porter? — No; well, he was a wonderfully keen fisherman. He would go anywhere for sport of that kind, down to the West Indies or out to the Pacific Coast. It was on one of his expeditions to the last ground he hooked a monster leaping tuna that tugged on the line for seven hours. The strength and endurance of that fish was marvelous. It pretty well exhausted Porter and his companions. Finally just as they were about to gaff the tuna, it made a supreme effort and broke the swivel. Porter felt sure the fish had escaped, but presently it rose to the surface, fins up, stone dead. When cut open its heart was found to have been actually broken by that last supreme struggle."

Burns smiled indulgently.

"Well," he said, "granted that an actual broken heart is possible in a fish, it would hardly add to a little bird's value in a collection of this kind, and besides what has it got to do with Ridgeley remaining a bachelor?"

"Everything," replied Anson. "I'll tell you. A casual acquaintance would probably not regard Ridgeley as a man of much sentiment. But he had his romance, and a mighty fine girl she was upon whom he fastened his affection. I don't know exactly what interposed to halt the marriage, but for some reason it was at any rate temporarily suspended.

"Then Ridgeley went off on his wanderings to out-of-the-way places, collecting all these things, and for a year disappeared entirely in Central Asia. A vague report came to hand that he had been murdered by caravan robbers, though according to Ridgeley's account his plight was no more desperate than being out of touch with telegraph wires.

"Finally he made for Persia, and turned up in Shiraz at a time when a rather curious contest was in progress. It appeared that the indolent inhabitants of that decadent city of poetic fame had scrambled from the dust and were beating each other over the head in angry recrimination regarding the rival merits of three singing nightingales. The three nightingales were respectively the property of three cafés, each café endeavoring to win exclusive patronage by the voice of its feathered songster, in Persia the nightingale taking the place of high-priced prima donnas with us.

"At the caravanserai where Ridgeley lodged, he fell into the company of an Englishman and an Australian. Very shortly the spirit of the contest took hold of them, and after visits to the three cafés, they became strong partisans. Ridgeley stoutly maintained that the bird he named Madame Nebraska, after his state, could give the other two long odds as a prima donna. With equal insistence the Englishman and the Australian stood by their favorites, calling them Madame Londoni and Madame Sydna respectively.

"Heretofore the three birds had not tested their vocal powers in each other's presence, and by this plan Ridgeley proposed to settle the question of superiority for all time. Hence it was to the Café of the Rose that the birds were brought in covered cages, each cage being suspended from the roof above a pool of clear water occupying the centre of the paved floor.

"As public interest in the nightingale contest had run to the

touch of dagger hilts when two men passed in the street, the stone bench around the walls was packed with cut-throat-looking figures, while the narrow bazaar outside and the little garden of blooming rose bushes from which the café took its sign were thronged with those unable to gain admittance. Kalyan mouthpieces went from hand to hand with wagers offered and taken, and tiny cups of black coffee were drained to the success of the backer's favorite.

"By arrangement with the proprietor lots were drawn for the order of the contest, the selection falling first to Londoni, then to Sydna, with the final effort reserved for Madame Nebraska.

"A silence of absorbed expectancy fell upon the throng when the cover was removed from Londoni's cage. That little bird ruffled her plumage, hopped around once or twice, took a firm grip on her perch, and puffing out her throat, gave expression to a few melodious notes. As it were, having gained her pitch, she set off with a series of trills which rose like a fountain tossing sprays of liquid gems into the air. Higher and higher she sent her voice, until somewhere in the zenith of the ethereal blue she touched her top note, fell and rose to it again, and then burst into a rhapsody of song. When she ceased, tapping her beak on the perch as if to challenge a better performance, grunts and ejaculations of approval brought down the house after the Persian fashion.

"Sydna followed much the same method as the first bird — the nightingale singing schools in Persia being very similar in their courses of tone production, etc. — but as she reached higher notes than her rival, the Australian grinned triumphantly upon the Englishman.

"Then Nebraska was uncovered. But instead of the little bird being found fluttering with restrained eagerness on her perch, the audience beheld her sitting motionless on the wicker shelf in the bottom of the cage. A murmur of adverse comment which ran around the stone bench prompted one of the attendants to recall the public songster to a sense of her duty with the tip of a wooden coffee-stirrer. She gazed around with her bead-like eyes almost in a dazed manner, presently shook her feathers in response to the encouraging words of her trainer, and hopped

bravely on to her perch. A moment of suspense followed. Nebraska was evidently nerving herself to a supreme effort. Presently she spread her wings, threw back her head, opened her beak wide, and — and from it came forth a crescendo plaintive squawk."

"A what?" ejaculated Burns with astonishment.

"Just a squawk," repeated Anson. "Then she toppled off her perch, backward, dead into the bottom of the cage."

"Dead into the bottom of the cage! But how did that happen?" questioned Burns.

"She died of a broken heart. She simply couldn't rise to the occasion and beat those other birds. She knew it, and that was the end of the great singingfest at Shiraz. When the excitement subsided, Ridgeley bought the dead bird and sent it to a local taxidermist to be stuffed. He showed Ridgeley the actual broken heart."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Burns. "But — but after all what has it got to do with Ridgeley's love affair?"

"Just this," explained Anson in a lower tone. "It was a curious coincidence, but Ridgeley subsequently discovered that little bird died about the same time as his sweetheart in the United States. It was said she also came to her end from a broken heart, owing to Ridgeley's long absence and the report that he had been killed by caravan robbers.

"Hush!" he added, laying a warning finger on his lips and drawing Burns away from the buhl and ormolu table. "I hear Ridgeley's footsteps. Don't refer to the subject. He is sensitive about it. But now you know why he remains a bachelor, and regards the little stuffed bird as his chief treasure. You may argue that coincidences such as this prove nothing, but for all that they make on the majority of us a lasting impression. Hence in Ridgeley's mind the connection between the dead nightingale and the romance of his life."

"Hello, Ridgeley," he turned to greet their host. "Burns, here, is interested in those Afghan swords."

The Last Word.*

BY THOMAS L. MASSON.

THE through train from Albuquerque rolled into the station and the man got off, a haggard face in the dim light of the great western city's afternoon. His eye lighted up at the recollection of the old-familiar surroundings. He had not taken a drink for three days — that is to say, ever since her letter was received. It read as follows:

> DEAREST:
> Won't you come back to me? No matter what you are, I want you. For I have always loved you. I got your address from your cousin Jake, whom I met on the street. I send you in this letter the money to come. Yes, dear, I am prosperous. I have supported myself ever since you went away. But I have loved you through it all, just the same. They tell me I am foolish, but I don't believe it. You will come to me at once, won't you? *Do not stop to think* and do not spend this money on anything to drink until you see me. I long for you more than I can say. Come.
>
> Always your loving wife,
>
> SALLIE.

He had telegraphed ahead that he would come, and now almost before he knew it, a pair of arms was about his neck, and he was holding close to him the little woman whom eight years before he had promised to shelter and protect.

He had not kept his promise. He had stolen away from her, little by little. His drinking had increased. He had lost his job. He had gone from bad to worse. He had abused her. And becoming at last a tramp on the face of the earth, he had wandered down to Albuquerque among companions where his talent for drinking whiskey was not overemphasized.

"Come," she whispered, "let us go home."

They took a west-bound car and in a few moments got off at a trim little two-family house. Here a certain sign attested that dressmaking was done on the premises.

She prepared the supper. Tired from his journey and from his lack of stimulant, he leaned back in his chair rest-

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lessly and watched her, as she moved skilfully about the place.

Ill at ease, he said but little. After the meal was over, and she settled back, her hand stole out to meet his.

"What is the matter, dear? Are you not happy?"

"I was thinking."

"Of what?"

He started up suddenly and looked at her.

"Sallie," he said, with a smile, "I need a little air. Would you mind if I took a turn around the block?"

Suddenly she shrank back. A look of instant distress came over her face. For the moment all her happiness had gone out of her. She knew what that meant.

But she was not unprepared.

"Billy," she asked, "how long is it since you took a drink?"

"Three days."

"Did you make any resolution when you got my letter?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"I said I'd quit."

She smiled at him playfully.

"Did you mean to?" she said.

He got up nervously and walked up and down the room.

"I ought not to have come," he answered. "But I couldn't help it. Little woman, I have always loved you. I love you now more than ever. But you know there are two sides to a man like me. I know what I ought to do — I can reason it all out as plain as daylight. And the way at times seems so easy. That's the way it was when I got your letter. I was a strong man then. And that is why I came. But I know now how weak I am. I ought not to have done it. I may be a drunkard, but I am not a coward."

She put her arms around him.

"You are a strong man still, dearest," she whispered, "if you will only believe so. What nonsense you talk. It frightens me to hear you. Think of it. You have me to help you, to fight with you, to struggle for you."

"You can't go on like that. You are able to support yourself because you are alone, unhampered. But with me — "

"You speak as if you were no earthly use any more. Bill, you must get over that. Why, you're the cleverest man I know. In a short time after you have gotten straightened out, you can go to work again. And you'll succeed. I won't think of anything else but that. And neither must you."

He looked down at her earnest face.

"Do you really believe that?" he asked.

"Of course I do. Why shouldn't I? It will be a little hard at first, but —"

"And you really do believe it?"

"Certainly."

She looked at him earnestly. Her lips quivered.

"Don't you?" she asked. "Say you do."

For a while he did not reply. Then an almost imperceptible change came over him. His face lighted up with a wonderful smile. It transformed him at once.

"Of course I do," he said, kissing her gaily. "You're a fine girl to talk that way. I was only joking when I said I wanted to go out. Come, dear, put away that look. It's all right. I am a strong man, as you say. And now let us be happy, for once forget everything but that we love each other.

* * * * * * *

It was past midnight. The light from the street lamp sent its feeble rays through the curtains and gave dim outlines where otherwise there would have been darkness.

The man had risen softly, his steps falling on the floor like velvet.

He dressed himself stealthily, stopping at intervals to listen to the regular breathing in the next room.

Then he stole to a corner where there was a small table. He opened the drawer. In the drawer was a satchel. From this satchel he took a roll of bills. He divided the roll into two parts, and took one.

Then he stole out of the house.

Once on the street he walked — almost ran. Finally an east-bound car overtook him.

He rode for some time in silence, and then got off. As he did so, he looked keenly at the illuminated clock on the opposite building.

In front of him was a saloon, the front door of which was closed. He walked swiftly around to the side entrance. He tried it. It opened to his touch.

He walked up to the bar, beside a belated small group of "hold overs" who were discordantly discussing some trivial question.

"What'll it be?" asked the bartender.

"Fill me a quart flask of whiskey."

The bartender complied. When he had handed out the flask and the man, receiving his change, had put it into his pocket, he said.

"Have a smile?"

"No, thanks. Good-night."

"Good-night."

The man went out. He crossed the street. He entered the waiting-room, where there was a small active motley crowd waiting for the gate to open.

He went up to the ticket office. The ticket agent looked at him indifferently as he put down his money.

"Where to?"

"Albuquerque."

"How many?"

The man turned in the direction of the ticket agent's face. A woman stood beside him.

"For two," she said, quietly.

The Long Chance.*

BY H. HARRISON.

HEN a man is bowled over by Fate, it frequently happens that his Guardian Angel comes along and leaves the side door ajar," said the Host, as he passed cigars.

"And the man has his eyes so keenly fixed on the Main Exit he doesn't see the Family Entrance," added the Cynic.

"I doubt that," said his Host. "Don't you think one is generally looking for another chance? And if it is earnestly desired, I believe the opportunity comes."

"Sophistry!" murmured the Cynic with a grin.

It was twilight. The glow from blazing logs encircled with light a group of three men sitting before the fire. A few paces back sat a woman near a tea-table. Beyond her was semi-gloom, with purpling twilight spaces at the windows.

A brief silence followed the Cynic's remark. The Japanese singing kettle from its place on the crane sent out strange eolian songs. Lines of smoke trailed upward incense-like from each cigar. Meeting above they spread into a canopy of gauze.

A blond man with peculiar eyes, across whose thick long lashes the fire seemed to lay a wide band of light, turned to his Host and remarked:

"I think you are right about opportunity. And if you have been instrumental in giving that chance, against long odds, and the man makes good it's the most satisfying thing I know. Oh, to retain one's illusions!"

"Disillusionment will become obsolete when we master the habit of expecting too much," said the woman.

"Do not speak in epigram, Madam," said he of the strange eyes. "An epigram is only an exception dressed to look like

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a rule. Perhaps the case I have in mind is exceptional."

"I infer that you speak from experience," said the Cynic, "convert me."

"I will try," said the other. "And to-day has made it possible. You may recall that our Company has quarters on the Pacific Coast. As an Executive Special my presence was needed out there. I was alone one dark afternoon. I turned on the lights and was making out a report to the home office. Some one knocked, tried the knob, found the door unlocked, and without waiting for an invitation, walked in.

"He wore a sombrero. Its wide soft brim slightly shaded his eyes. He did not remove his hat. The green shade over the electric bulb kept the upper part of the room in shadow, and made but dimly visible his face. I looked at him inquiringly. In a quiet carrying voice he said, 'I want work, and I want *you,* slight emphasis on *you,* to give it to me.'

"His manner and voice, especially the inflection, surprised me. The voice was low, composed, insistent. There was a sort of hypnotic quality about it. Of course I said the usual thing.

"We are not in need of help."

"'But *I* am.' He again emphasized the pronoun.

"'I am sorry that we cannot accommodate you,' I replied.

"Of course there really was work for another man, the right one. I should have to return East soon. After I left it would be necessary to break in a new man. The New England office had written me to wind up my affairs in the West at my earliest convenience.

"But, thought I, this is no way to engage a man with a pistol at your head, as it were. I came out of my thoughts with a start, feeling he had said something unusual, the words of which I had missed.

"He was stretching out his hand. It came within the circle of light, and was as compelling as his voice. It had seen hard labor, recently, too, I judged; it was the hand of a gentleman; looked like an artist's hand, long tapering fingers. They were spatulate at the tips instead of pointed. That was a good sign — capability. The thumb showed tact."

"With all your other accomplishments are you a palmist, too?" asked the woman at the tea-table.

"Not a bona-fide one, but people's hands interest me. They are so speaking. Also, they never lie. A man can make his own mouth, and arrange his eyes to suit his present desire, but he can't monkey with his hands. To those who can read they tell the tale, — as do the stars the destiny of states."

The Cynic from the other side of the fire-place gave a snort of derision. The story-teller, scenting an argument, continued in haste.

"'Give me your pen,' I heard him say. Trance-like I handed it to him. That is one thing I never do; let any one use my pen. But without a murmur I gave it to him. Under my hand was a premium receipt on which I had just signed my name. He picked it up, gave a glance at the signature, sat down at the opposite side of the desk, and with my pen wrote a name on a fragment of paper. He passed it to me. It was my name with all the quirks and quavers of my very own. Even the double curve of the down stroke of J. I would have sworn by all holy that I and no one else had penned it. My amazement was most evident.

"He laughed, a short queer sound, not much mirth in it.

"'You see before six o'clock to-night I can get all the money I need. But I don't want it that way. I wish to get it honestly. Will *you* help me?'

"Now, I ask you, what could a fellow do under the circumstances?"

"Call the police," murmured the Cynic.

"If a man needs a chance to be straight, one doesn't care to be responsible for sending him to the dogs. It looked pretty much as if he had me, anyway. I'd cash my own check, without question, on that signature. Then when the man sat down to write, and came under the rays of the light, his face was clearly in view. It was a good face. The mouth a bit wavering, perhaps."

"I suppose he had made that," broke in the Host with a sly wink at his neighbor.

"Of course, but, conditions right, he could make it

stronger, and I had determined to give him the opportunity.

"Well, to continue, I did a heap of thinking in that moment of silence. I ended by engaging him. Surmising that he hadn't much coin in his jeans, I took out a bill and pushed it toward him. Before I could speak he declined it with thanks; assured me that he could exist on his present possessions until pay day.

"The next morning he reported on time. To account for his presence so unexpectedly, I invented a story for the stenographer and my other assistants.

"He said little, did well what I gave him to do, with a comprehensive response not often met. Before the week had passed I wondered how I had gotten on without him. Always seemed to know what was needed; plenty of intuition. I've found in my business that intuition can accomplish more in a day than mere reason in a month. That is probably true in every sphere.

"When I had a prospect in the office I purposely kept him near. To all appearances he was deaf to surroundings. I knew he wasn't missing a trick. As my confidence in him grew, and he became more familiar with our line, I sent him out on prospects. When he landed his initial policy, truly, I was as elated as he. I wonder why I took such an interest in him. I told you he had a hypnotic voice. I guess he had me going from the moment he spoke.

"It was on the second month of his advent that he walked in late one afternoon. The others had gone. He took a paper from his pocket, opened it, and laid it before me. It was an application for a ten-thousand-dollar policy, and the name of the prospective holder was that of one of the most prosperous druggists on the Coast. A man every insurance agent in town had been after, but none had succeeeded in landing.

"With considerable surprise I asked him how he did it. He replied, 'By talking about everything but insurance. We have become a bit friendly of late. He said I was the first insurance man that had never asked him to take out a policy.'

"Things seemed to be coming his way pretty steadily after that. One of my assistants became ill, grew worse, had to give up and go into the mountains. The other one felt the call of

the East too strongly to resist, resigned, and made for home.

"A plan had been gradually forming in my mind. I wired the home office to send out an experienced man. They had a young fellow who had been with the Company some time. A dependable boy, well broken in. I felt sure they would send him on. He was just the one to fit into my scheme.

"Another week would wind up my business, then I could leave the land of quakes and make for the place of thunderstorms. Not that I fancy thunderstorms, but that I like earthquakes less. Never could get used to having terra firma take on that lemon-jelly feeling. It was most apropos that the two office men should depart, and a new one, wholly strange to the place, should come in. By the time he arrived my plans would be working.

"The stranger had made no reference to his past. That there had been some tragedy in it, I felt certain. Whatever he had been, I knew not. What he was becoming was a sure thing. Some one must take charge when I left, and I had decided it should be he.

"That same day came the opportunity to broach the subject. I invited him to dine with me at a little restaurant, a charming place, full of atmosphere. I had reserved a table somewhat apart from the others in an alcove between two large pillars. It shut us off, partly, from the main room. The dinner was just a plain little affair, but cooked and served to please the most discerning epicure.

"We talked little. When we did I spoke of responsibilities and purposely kept in the channel leading to the proposition I expected to spring over our cigars.

"The best laid plans of mice and men, et cetera, was my case. Before I could take the breath out of him with my announcement, and give him my blessing in the usual happy way, he turned the tables.

"I noticed during the evening he was pretty serious; seemed to be weighing things in his mind. He had left most of the conversation to me, though that usually happened. He was a man of few words, but they were well chosen and to the point. However, when he spoke I knew he had been planning one on

me. The fulness of my own mind and heart kept me from thinking much about his preoccupation.

"I had taken about three good whiffs at my cigar. I made a ring, and was watching it float up and widen into space, and mentally framing the opening words to my announcement, when he said:

"'I feel I ought to tell you that you've no business to trust me as you do. You know nothing about me. I might be a lunatic, escaped, or a criminal.'

"'I know all I need to right now, and I'm going to trust you still further,' said I, warm with inward glee at the news in store for him.

"'Don't,' he said. And when he removed the ashes from his cigar his hand trembled. He continued:

"'You have been mighty good to me. You pulled me up when I was going down for the last time. If you had turned me down that afternoon I would have cast my lot with the underworld. The best things that have come into my life have been gained through you. The greatest thing that happens to a man has come to me since then. I wish to heaven I deserved it. Because of that, and what you have done for me, I feel I owe you a confession. I'—he paused, and a suppressed excitement, which made a lump rise in his throat, communicated itself to me. My inward glow had given place to a chill of fear. A sort of ague of the solar plexus, I guess.

"'I ought to tell you,' he paused, then said, quietly, 'that I've served time.'

"Neither of us spoke for a moment. The tension was high. We had been strung up the whole evening, but from different reasons. How about my plans for him now?

"Thoughts chased like mad through my brain. His voice broke in on them saying:

"'Perhaps you can guess why I was put behind the bars. You may recall without effort, that I have a talent with my pen. I was driven to the wall; the old story, got desperate. It's not a pleasant tale. Nothing is to be gained by recounting it. I was tempted, and used my cursed gift. I always had it. As a youngster I was proud of my ability. I had served my

term, tried to get work, day after day. No one wanted me. I had reached the desperate stage. That day I came to you would end my attempts to keep in the straight and narrow path.

"'As I walked up the street I threw up my head with that resolve. My eye caught the light in your window. And like a symbol the words Mutual Life were silhouetted against it. Sounds maudlin, doesn't it? By a strange chance, if anything ever is chance, and I doubt it, the rest of the title before and after those words was cut off by the upper and lower shades. I counted the floors up to your light. There were nine. Symbolic number. An old soothsayer once told me that, as I was born on Sunday, nine was my fateful number. I ought to have been a cat. Guess she hit it for once. I entered the elevator and came up to you. Like the proverbial straw to the drowning man, I felt you were the last hope. You alone could save me.

"'Somehow I feel I can't be tempted again. They tell us we can have a change of heart. I think mine has come. Oh! yes, search for the woman! I've met her. We live in the same house. Her parents are dead. She holds a good position as secretary to a writer and lecturer. We have met quite often. Been out together some. I know she is fond of me. It was mutual from the first. I can never ask her to marry me, and keep silent as to my past. If I tell her the truth, I am cowardly enough to fear that I'll lose her. Tell me, what shall I do?'

"Moved by a sudden impulse, I said, 'I told you I was going to trust you farther — and I will prove it. In a few days I must start for the East. The young chap from the home office will arrive Wednesday. Before he comes on the scene I will install you as manager of this western branch. And you will take on another man besides.'

"He tried to speak. I don't know what he said. I know what he looked. Moisture came into his eyes. He reached across the table and grasped my hand.

"'You don't know what that means to me, but I can't do it. It is too much for you to give, too great for me to accept.'

"'Nonsense,' I said, 'I've made up my mind to install you manager here, and you must take it. As to the girl, tell her

the whole truth. If she loves you, and is the right sort, the past will make no difference to her. It's the *now* that counts. Your right is to forget the past. Your duty to live your best in the present. Then you need have no fears for the future. Take my advice and tell her the truth.'

"Well, I had my way. When the new man arrived from the East he was duly presented to his manager. The next day I started home.

"To be brief. It was necessary to tell the officers the state of affairs out there. Some of them thought I was crazy. The treasurer was for starting out there at once. He said any man who had been crooked once couldn't be banked on not to do it again under temptation. We had a hot and lively session. But the president had considerable confidence in my judgment. He said if I would be responsible for my protégé, the appointment could stand, for all he cared. So it was settled. He is there now."

"And did he tell her?" asked the woman.

For reply the narrator drew from his pocket a telegram. Passing it to the woman he said: "Read."

She knelt before the fire. The Cynic stirred the flames into brilliancy. By their glow she read:

"Took your advice. Kate is a brick. Wedding in June."

"And this is May," said the woman.

That Little Laugh of Hers.*

BY MARY MORRISON RAYNAL.

How fair those locks which now the light wind stirs!
What eyes she has, and what a perfect arm!
And yet methinks that little laugh of hers —
That little laugh — is still her crowning charm.
Where'er she passes, countryside or town,
The streets make festa and the fields rejoice.
Should sorrow come, as 'twill, to cast me down,
Or Death, as come he must, to hush my voice,
Her laugh would wake me just as now it thrills me,
That little giddy laugh wherewith she kills me.

MAROT.

ROFESSOR HILTON, known in college circles as Old Bones, was witnessing, for the first time in years, a comic opera. The spectacular, the audacious cleverness, so long undreamed of in his philosophy, dawned for him as a fresh discovery. He forcibly held his feet to the ground to keep them from beating time to the music. His near-sighted eyes peered delightedly at the maze of lights. His hands went together with almost childlike glee when the queen of the opera glittered before the footlights.

She was a charmingly rounded bit of femininity, this comic opera queen, welcoming her applause naively, not much voice, but how she could laugh! In the midst of the hollow stage laughter hers gurgled out like the apotheosis of eternal youth. She laughed as children should, but rarely do. Laughed with an infectiousness that shook her audience until they wiped their eyes and held their sides in an intoxication of mirth. In her laughter was the liquidness of mountain streams, the ecstasy of mating birds, the giddy irresponsibility of lambs on the meadow green.

She must be very good in order to laugh so, thought Old Bones, only the superlatively innocent could be so joyous. He left the city with the echo of this laughter in his ears. He went back to his laboratory, toiling in its smelly depths, but his heart

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had escaped from the test tubes. As he toiled, there would ring through his brain an elfin laughter, a whirling, maddening thing, but with it all exquisitely dainty.

Less than forty were Old Bones' years, but he had been born old, the product of academic shades. The depths of his college's intellectuality were of his digging, but he was helpless in their times of merry-making. Eloquent in his class-room he was dumb before a slip of a girl. He had never known a woman intimately, was not even blessed with the memory of a boyish sweetheart. But at last he was becoming humanized. He astonished the Faculty hostesses by accepting their invitations, and listening with intensive eagerness to the mirthful sounds around him. Sometimes, amid much artificial laughter, he caught a note of that laughter which rang continually in his heart.

Sometimes when the Faculty children, chubbily awkward in their little coats and leggings, were playing in the dead leaves, Old Bones would lean on a near-by stone wall listening to the childish glee, striving to break, by the nearness to small human kind, the elfin charm which bound him.

By midwinter the opera was on the road, billed to play in a neighboring town. Professor Hilton, under cover of attending a convention of the Scientific Society, was about to hear again that laughter. He had schooled himself to disappointment. He told himself that it was impossible for her to have retained her spontaneity, that playing twice daily through a season would necessarily tend to the mechanical.

The local playhouse lacked the glamor of the metropolitan theatre, the chorus was diminished. But there was the same old irresistible quality in the notes which the little queen flung out, notes that rollicked and caroled together like winged creatures. It was as if Balder the Beautiful had been reincarnated, flowers should have sprung up in her path.

When the curtain fell for the last time Old Bones, lured by her witchery, made his way behind the scenes. For a few precious moments the world was shut out. Dumb, as he always was with women, his worship blazed in his eyes, and she, instantly responsive, mocked and

caressed him in turn with waves of low, wondrous laughter.

Again Old Bones returned to his test tubes, and was faithful to them through the remainder of the bleak days. But when the leaves began to green, and the birds to mate he was unaccountably called South. The gaunt professor was flying on an errand that would have shocked the most irresponsible of his freshmen. He was going to the queen of a comic opera, he was going to say to her:

"Little child, leave your false world where they gild the lily and paint the rose. Come with me to my serene land of truth and purity."

The train set itself to the measure of Locker's paraphrase of one of Marot's *Epigrammes*:

> Should sorrow come, as 'twill, to cast me down,
> Or Death, as come he must, to hush my voice,
> Her laugh would wake me just as now it thrills me.

He could not fancy himself so dead that he would not stir with her laughter.

Arrived at last in a far southwestern town, quivering with the sense of her nearness, a hot pang of shame shot through him at sight of the posters — his future wife prancing in tights.

He was barely in time for the rising of the curtain. To his dismay an understudy was bowing over the footlights, an understudy whose effort to imitate that laughter was as hideous as a jay's emulation of a linnet.

At the box office he was told of the sudden illness of the leading lady, and given the name of her hotel. Hastening thither, consumed with an anxiety almost maternal in its intensity, he paused at a florist's long enough to purchase an enormous bunch of roses.

After much difficulty an interview was secured with the manager of the opera company. The man was heavy, sullen, noncommittal, but the professor was in the habit of firing leading questions to be answered in manly fashion. The manager, pushed to the wall, finally blurted out:

"No, she's not dangerously ill — just a tumble from the water wagon. Fact is, Dotty's been hitting the ground in high

places all winter. This is the first time she's been too full to go on, though, and," threateningly, "it'll be the last!"

The professor went white: "Dropping all innuendoes, will you please state in plain English just what you mean?"

"In plain English," brutally, "she is drunk."

The roses slid to the floor. The professor's lank figure collapsed. Buttoning his old-fashioned coat around him he went out into the night, in his heart the agonizing prayer that there might be stilled for him that little giddy laugh wherewith she had killed him.

The Square of Chinese Embroidery.*

BY ANNA McCLURE SHOLL.

THE bland light of the wax candles lent to the many ancient pieces in the room a tone even softer than their own autumnal hues. Into the tapestried effect of the whole were woven gleams of dull gold, a revelation of strange blues, with here and there a note of white lent by the trembling stalks of narcissus in vases of old silver. A wood-fire made pleasant sounds on the low hearth. At a spinet some one sat evoking plaintive tremulous music. The guests sipping their coffee seemed more inclined for reverie than conversation.

The distinguished actress in whose honor the dinner had been given was chatting with her hostess, her slender figure in graceful attitude upon a *chaise-longue*. The dead white of her gown was relieved only by a string of sapphires whose deep blue hearts evoked the blue of the wearer's eyes, now turned admiringly upon the art-objects about her.

"What pleases you most?" her hostess inquired.

"Who could choose among the many beautiful things here!—but I should like to examine more closely the square of embroidery you have framed under glass."

"You shall have it in your hands."

Veronica Ward rose and crossed the room, followed by the eyes of her guests, for whom she expressed the very spirit of the place itself. To some of these it seemed as if romances might be again in preparation for her. When old suitors return from distant lands, society has a right to expect that the curtain will rise on a comedy or a tragedy, as the case may be.

Veronica carried the frame of embroidery to Madame Duval. The others gathered about the *chaise-longue* to examine the treasure.

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"It is a modern piece," the hostess explained, "embroidered, I believe, by a Chinese girl in prison, who wove her own peculiar fancies through these strange blues and greens — fancies I can't quite make out. There appears to be a motive of dragons strangling each other — or else the little bird caught between them — this flash of gold is one of its wings, you see, and it has apparently fallen from the bough of cherry blossoms just suggested in those faint white flowers. The border, as far as I can discover, is made up of conventionalized Chinese characters — conventionalized, indeed, beyond all reading. I have asked several persons supposed to read Chinese to interpret them, but they found them too difficult."

"Have you asked Mr. Millward?" a debutante questioned.

"Mr. Stanton has been in China, too, hasn't he?" some one else inquired.

The men appearing at that moment in the doorway of the drawing-room a general appeal was made to them to unravel the mystery. Frederick Millward, for several years an unofficial sojourner in the shadow of the American Legation at Pekin, came languidly forward, looking from under his heavy eyelids at his hostess with the air of a man who expects very soon to become an accepted suitor. The general opinion of her circle that Veronica Ward would never marry again was an added spur to his ambition.

She addressed him.

"Mr. Millward, you should be able to tell us what these characters mean."

He glanced at the square of embroidery, then at Madame Duval, whose well-poised head was still bent over the frame. The flash of the large pendent sapphire at her throat held his eyes for a moment, while a light stole into them that even the vision of Veronica Ward had not been able to kindle.

Madame Duval, becoming aware of his gaze upon her, looked up with a challenging smile.

"I think these mysterious letters should be made a test like Portia's caskets."

"The reward is too great to hang upon such a trifle," said a voice in the background.

The speaker was Giles Stanton, a civil engineer, for several years in the service of the Chinese government. A tradition existed that his exile dated from the time that Veronica Chester had become Mrs. Ward, but whether or not she was the magnet that had drawn him home was a question only to be settled by future developments. The sun and wind of strange climates had transformed him into a stranger — an enigma of the East, as some one called him, who had attempted to break through his courteous taciturnity.

Millward took his gaze from the sapphire and turned it somewhat sullenly upon Stanton, measuring his inches, remarking mentally that that sort of weather-beaten, silent, muscular man made, as a rule, a rival of no mean pretensions. Ten years ago he had ignored Stanton, then obscure and unsuccessful, but during those years their paths had crossed more than once in the Orient, each time with a cumulative advantage in Stanton's favor. Millward made up his mind during the dinner of this evening that in the wooing of Mrs. Ward he would act quickly.

"Won't you try to read these characters for us, Mr. Millward?" his hostess said, again appealing to him.

He came to her side and bent over the frame with the appearance of studying the embroidery, but he could make nothing of it at first sight, and he was too indifferent to attempt seriously to decipher it. He prolonged his examination, however, until some one exclaimed:

"I believe he knows and won't tell us!"

"I confess I can't make it out."

"Now, Mr. — Stanton — your turn!"

Millward made way for his rival. As he did so he dropped his handkerchief and picked it up again with his usual slowness of movement. Then he stood aside to let Stanton pass.

Veronica Ward felt her hands tremble a little as Stanton approached. She laid the frame upon an adjacent table where the light fell on it.

"Are you going to fail, too, Mr. Stanton?" Madame Duval asked. "The solving of this riddle, remember, may admit one to paradise."

"I can read the ordinary Chinese characters; but these have been twisted for the purpose of ornament — or perhaps concealment — almost beyond recognition," he replied. After a few moments' scrutiny he turned to his hostess.

"Have you a magnifying glass? What I took for a single row of characters will resolve itself, I think, under a glass into three rows."

Veronica rang and directed the maid who appeared to bring a glass from the library. Stanton looked through it intently for some minutes, then his hostess saw him give a little start and change color. But in a moment the ripple of agitation passed from his features, leaving them again calm and noncommittal. Suddenly he put the glass on the table and turned away with a short laugh.

"It's beyond my powers to unravel."

"You were my last hope! Now I shall never know whether a blessing or a curse hangs on my walls."

"Only blessings could come to you," some one said, politely platitudinous.

A shadow passed over her face.

"I am a little doubtful that a blessing surrounds that allegory of a bird caught between two dragons. I had hoped that Mr. Stanton would be able to read the riddle."

"I thought you were a great Chinese scholar, Stanton," Millward remarked with mild malice.

"Another case of reputation being greater than achievement," Stanton replied, carelessly.

Veronica, conscious of the note of antagonism struck by the two men, turned to the debutante.

"Aren't you going to sing for us, Gladys?"

At that moment there was a startled exclamation from Madame Duval, who rose suddenly from the *chaise-longue*.

"My pendant, my sapphire — it is gone!"

Veronica came quickly to her side. Everybody looked at the necklace. The setting which had held the big sapphire dangled empty from the chain. Veronica put out a warning hand.

"Stand just where you are, Madame Duval. It has probably dropped at your feet."

"I saw it only ten minutes ago," Millward remarked, as he knelt to begin the search. "I was noticing its wonderful color."

The others joined him. Every moment some one expected some one else to say, "here it is," but the circle of searchers widened as it became evident that the sapphire had not fallen at Madame Duval's feet. She was visibly agitated when the gem was not found at once. A sapphire known to two continents was to be considered more seriously than a bangle dropped from a schoolgirl's bracelet.

"Step aside now, please, Madame Duval," Veronica directed, "and let them move the *chaise-longue*."

Madame Duval crossed to the other side of the room. The chair on which she had been sitting was moved. At last every inch of space within a radius of ten feet of the *chaise-longue* had been gone over in vain. The peculiar quiet was beginning to fall upon the guests which betokens consciousness of an awkward situation.

Veronica approached Madame Duval.

"You are sure it did not fall into the corsage of your dress?"

"Perfectly sure."

"Nor into the laces of your gown?"

"They could not hold it. It is too heavy."

Stanton had stopped searching and was bending again over the square of embroidery, examining it closely through the glass. Madame Duval glanced towards him with a little rueful smile.

"Mr. Stanton's interest in the Chinese embroidery is greater than his concern over the loss of my sapphire," she remarked. "Mr. Millward does not give up so easily."

Millward, indeed, was still prosecuting the search with vigor, shaking out draperies, looking under chairs where he had already looked a dozen times. At last he, too, stopped and came gravely to Madame Duval.

"I am afraid we are facing but one conclusion," he said in a low voice.

"That conclusion has been in my mind for some moments," she replied. Then turning to Mrs. Ward, she said:

"What do you know of the parlor maid who brought the mag-

nifying glass to Mr. Stanton? It seems terrible to suggest such a thing, but while we were all watching him she might easily have stooped and picked up the sapphire unobserved."

Veronica looked grave.

"Hortense has been with me eight years and I know her to be thoroughly trustworthy."

"But, Mrs. Ward," Millward said, gently, "we are being pushed, you see, to an inevitable conclusion — unless we — unless we all come under suspicion!" he added with a laugh.

"I think we have no more right to fasten suspicion upon a servant than upon any other person."

Madame Duval nodded assent.

"I quite agree with you, Mrs. Ward. I understand how embarrassing it is to question an old servant upon such a subject, but, frankly, what else remains for us to do? We've looked everywhere. A quarter of an hour ago the sapphire was on my chain. None of us has left the room, but in that quarter of an hour your maid entered and left it."

"She might be unaware of the great value of the stone," Millward remarked; "she might think it a bauble of blue glass dropped from some ornament in the drawing-room."

Veronica smiled.

"Hortense is not stupid, Mr. Millward."

"No; if she found it," Madame Duval said, "she probably knew what it was."

"But it has to be proved that she found it," Veronica added.

The guests were now conversing in little groups from which occasionally some one would detach himself and start again to search. Only Stanton remained apparently impassive and indifferent near the table which held the square of embroidery. Veronica glanced towards him as, consenting at last to Madame Duval's wish that Hortense be questioned, she was preparing to leave the drawing-room. Something in the mute appeal of her look told him that she needed his aid, and he crossed the room to her side. She communicated to him Madame Duval's suspicions of Hortense and her own reluctance to interrogate the girl.

"But something has to be set in motion," she added. "A

valuable sapphire cannot have disappeared out of my drawing-room by magic."

He glanced about to be sure that no one was near enough to overhear them.

"Don't go to Hortense. Go into the library and remain there until I come for you. I believe that the sapphire will be found."

The protection in his manner, the desire to serve her written in his face, took a load of care from her shoulders and thrilled her for a moment with a sweet unreasoning happiness. She could not divine what he meant or whom he suspected, or if he suspected any one, but she rested gladly in the knowledge that he was standing between her and an unpleasant situation. She left the room apparently to summon Hortense.

Stanton went to Madame Duval, spoke with her a few moments on the subject of her loss, then, as others came up he made his way to the farther end of the room where Millward was still pursuing a desultory search. As Stanton approached he looked up, changed color, then said lightly:

"What a devil of a nuisance!"

Stanton nodded.

"Most unfortunate! You said once, Millward, at a certain game of cards you may remember was played one afternoon at Pekin, that if you could ever get out of debt you'd go back to the United States. That afternoon — if again your memory does not fail you — you made a desperate effort to get out of debt by cheating at cards."

Millward had turned a dull angry red.

"You lie!"

"You know I do not lie."

"What are you hovering over me for like a vulture?"

"To make sure of you! I let you go then rather than create a scandal at the legation. But I shall not let you go now. I offer you the choice of giving up the sapphire, or being forced to give it up."

"Forced!"

"Yes, I said 'forced.' You threw the theft of the Marquette ruby on Cherry-blossom, the little servant at the Marquette's who did you the honor of caring for you; and bearing

a punishment that should have fallen on your shoulders."

"Cherry-blossom!" Millward echoed, his lips blue.

"You remember her beyond doubt. You abused both her faith and the Marquette's hospitality. The loss of their ruby, a family heirloom, made a great stir at the time, but it was Cherry-blossom who was sent to prison!"

"What the devil has that to do with —"

"It has everything to do with this present difficulty. I am determined that no other innocent girl shall be called a thief that you may go scot-free."

Millward's eyes had grown round and pale with superstitious fear.

"Where did you rake up this —"

"I'll not expose you on two conditions," Stanton interrupted. "The first is that you restore the sapphire. Drop it on the floor — shake it from a curtain, or any other trick to cover yourself, then restore it to Madame Duval. The second condition is, that you leave this house the instant you have given up the sapphire — and never enter it again. If you do, I shall tell Mrs. Ward everything."

Millward was livid.

"What proof —" he began.

"You dropped your handkerchief. Stooping to pick it up, I saw by the motion of your fingers that you picked something else up with it. But that would not have been enough without the confirmation I had later."

"Whose?" Millward demanded.

"A woman's. You can never make up to Cherry-blossom what she has suffered for you, but if you can ever earn any money honestly I advise you to donate some of it to her, or to her family, who were partially dependent on her."

Millward gave him a look of impotent hatred, then recovering his *sang-froid,* strolled down the drawing-room, stopped to speak to Madame Duval, then, apparently stimulated by her anxiety, renewed the search near the *chaise-longue.* Stanton, watching him, could not help admiring his histrionic power in spite of his contempt for the man himself. Suddenly there was a delighted exclamation. The debutante

ran across the room, holding up the jewel to Madame Duval.

"It was between the back and the seat of your chair. It must have slipped down at the very first."

Madame Duval clapped her hands, then kissed the girl on both cheeks.

"You dear! Did you find it?"

"No! Mr. Millward found it. He was suddenly inspired to look in the unlikely places."

Madame Duval swept across the room, holding out expressive, grateful hands.

"Mr. Millward, I am, indeed, your debtor. You searched so faithfully."

"Who would not search forever to relieve you of an instant's anxiety?" he replied. "And now that you have your treasure I have to ask your pardon for leaving before you. I have a friend who is ill, and I have promised to look in on him this evening."

Veronica, coming up at that moment, he repeated his excuses. She thanked him for relieving them all of a great anxiety. With a ceremonious farewell to the company, in which Stanton was elaborately included, Millward took his departure.

* * * * * * *

"You haven't explained the mystery — but whether you ever explain it matters little. Somehow, someway, you saved us from a most awkward situation."

All the dinner guests had departed except Stanton, who was standing with his hostess before the fireplace. Both were conscious of deeper issues than the loss and recovery of Madame's sapphire.

"I did what I did — for you."

She was silent, and he added:

"All these last years have been for you."

In the stillness that followed his words it seemed to her that he must hear the loud beating of her heart, the yearning reply of her spirit that all her life was for him. The interlude of her dreary marriage, too dreary even to be called unhappy, had only made that consciousness sharper and brighter, sharp and

bright as a knife, she sometimes thought, turning and turning in her heart.

He read her answer in her face.

Later, when they had emerged a little from their trance of complete happiness, her mind went back over the evening as if to trace the steps that had led to this hour of fulfilment.

"Tell me," she questioned. "Were you really unable to read the riddle on the square of embroidery — or was it something you didn't care to say to them all?"

He smiled.

"I could read it, but to translate it would have seemed rather pompous — particularly after Millward had failed."

"Tell me what it said."

"It was simply the statement of the woman who embroidered the square that she did not steal the ruby for the theft of which she was imprisoned. With her own eyes she had seen the man she loved take it; but to shield him she had accepted the guilt."

"How curious! The man was a countryman of hers, I suppose."

Stanton hesitated a moment.

"No, he was — a foreigner. Even his name is worked into the border, so you must never allude to the story lest some oriental scholar ask to interpret the characters."

"I shall put the embroidery away," Veronica said, "the record it bears is too sad."

"But even she found hope in it. Cherry-blossom — her name she says is Cherry-blossom — wove something here where the letters grow faintly rose and gold. They read: 'Love is a mighty god. I serve him gladly.'"

She raised her face to his — full of a happy light.

"And so will we," she finished.